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Free to Be Dog Haven: Dogs Who May Never Be Pets?

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Abstract

I am an artist who runs a sanctuary for dogs. I did not start the sanctuary as a studio project, but, as it turns out, it is very much an extension of my studio work. The sanctuary focuses on acknowledging canine subjectivity and agency in the context of colonialist, Western, modernist human fictions, a context explored throughout my work, in general. Our sanctuary is a site of ongoing investigation: we seek to map the territory between 'free' and 'pet'. This paper examines the thinking behind and the practical life of my dog sanctuary: exigencies of doghuman collaboration and what it means for a dog to be free – whether it's possible for the domestic dog to live among humans without being a pet.

Keywords

dog sanctuary, pet, canis familiaris, canine behavior, training, animal shelters, rescue

Free to Be Dog Haven: Dogs Who May Never Be Pets?

René J. Marquez

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Founder: Free to Be Dog Haven

*To provide a home and quality of life for dogs who may face challenges
sharing their lives with humans.*

Mission statement, Free to Be Dog Haven

Abstract: I am an artist who runs a sanctuary for dogs. I did not start the sanctuary as a studio project, but, as it turns out, it is very much an extension of my studio work. The sanctuary focuses on acknowledging canine subjectivity and agency in the context of colonialist, Western, modernist human fictions, a context explored throughout my work, in general. Our sanctuary is a site of ongoing investigation: we seek to map the territory between ‘free’ and ‘pet’. This paper examines the thinking behind and the practical life of my dog sanctuary: exigencies of dog-human collaboration and what it means for a dog to be free – whether it’s possible for the domestic dog to live among humans without being a pet.

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Introduction

After working in dog rescue for some years, I developed an affinity for dogs who need extra help sharing their lives with humans. I gravitated toward the anxious, fearful, high-energy dogs, who were misunderstood. I continue to learn as much as possible about dog training and behavior, ethology, neuroscience, and so on, all in the name of providing as high a quality of life as possible for my canine companions. I am sensitive to the label ‘behavioral issue’ being applied to a dog who simply does not meet human expectations. The philosophy of the sanctuary is to acknowledge the individuality of each dog and offer them the freedom to be who they are.

The sanctuary owes to a broad range of ideas. From Donna Haraway’s notion of ‘companion species’, to biologist Ray Coppinger’s investigations of ‘what is a dog’, to the work of animal behaviorists and trainers like Patricia McConnell, Karen Pryor, and many others. While we cannot truly *know* dogs – even those closest to us – we can embrace possibilities for re-inventing our relationships with them based on who we are together, not who we are as species.

I established Free to Be Dog Haven dog sanctuary with the aim of creating a space where dogs could be liberated from human expectations as much as possible. I developed this guiding philosophy through my experiences volunteering with various rescue groups and at local shelters for over ten years prior. Through these experiences, I saw dogs euthanized for perceived behavioral problems. I considered much of the euthanizing unjust since, from my perspective, the dogs were simply behaving like dogs; they were stressed and fearful, some were traumatized, many had suffered different forms of abuse at the hands of humans. Their emotional distress translated into behaviors perceived as aggressive or otherwise potentially dangerous to humans or other dogs. While the dogs acted instinctively, their instinctive behavior did not conform to the human world around them. Unfortunately, the human world was the only one in which they could live, and the gatekeepers to that world judged their suitability. At the time, I was in no position to object to shelters’ euthanasia practices or offer alternatives. Now, however, I can. My sanctuary, by design, works only with shelters and rescue groups (as

opposed to private citizens), in hopes of providing a home for dogs who might otherwise be euthanized. We, the sanctuary, are a space where dogs can be dogs.¹ To a degree.

The domestic dog today, for better or worse, is a product of human invention. As Alexandra Horowitz and other dog science experts say, no such thing as wild *canis familiaris* exists. Domestic dogs have been bred and manipulated out of human need and taste. For our companion dogs, our human homes are their natural habitats. There is no forest or prairie to which they can escape. If a dog ends up at a shelter and is deemed unsuitable as a pet, where will they go? Free to Be Dog Haven offers a safe place to land. Even though our sanctuary strives to minimize human expectations of dogs, domestic dogs have evolved in human spaces, so to create a space where they are free of human expectations may challenge their nature. Conversely, the sanctuary itself faces a parallel contradiction: how can *humans* minimize *human* expectations of their companion animals?

I negotiate the nature of human expectations in the sanctuary every day in different ways. The goal is not to eliminate human expectations *per se* but to re-envision them to acknowledge and respect each dog's subjectivity and agency. I regard the dogs as collaborators, not as pets. Rather than upholding conventional delineations of dog and human, the dog-human collaboration in the sanctuary illustrates what Donna Haraway offers as the co-constitutive nature of relationships between companion species (*When Species Meet* 12). Haraway offers the term 'significant otherness', a concept that extends the space of the sanctuary as a site of action:

How can general knowledge be nurtured in postcolonial worlds committed to taking difference seriously? Answers to these questions can only be put together in emergent practices, i.e., in vulnerable, on-the-ground work that cobbles together non-harmonious agencies and ways of living that are accountable both to their disparate inherited histories and to their barely possible but absolutely necessary joint futures. For me, that is what *significant otherness* signifies. (*The Companion Species Manifesto* 7)

The 'emergent practice', in the case of the sanctuary, intertwines the histories of colonized cultures, one human, one non-human, toward multispecies collaborative being. In the construction of our physical and conceptual space, identities cannot be extracted from one

another; the knowledge each brings can neither be prioritized nor categorized. The human and non-human respectively are superseded by the unit they become. In the making of cross-species relationships, reliance on conventional understanding of what constitutes either must give way to yet-to-be-discovered understanding of the subject.

On the other hand, the reality of living with 20 large dogs in one house challenges Haraway's prescriptions for negotiating difference and mutual accountability. I will confess that my ability to inch beyond an anthropocentric perspective relies heavily on forced discomfort. Living with 20 dogs in my house has forced me beyond the boundaries of my own human-centred lifestyle. Regardless of how much I might choose to construct a life and home around the desires and needs of my human identity, the sheer number of dogs sharing my house with me moves me into a collaborative space both figuratively and literally. Figuratively because, as Vinciane Despret might say, I have to ask the right questions in order for the dogs to give me the right answers. And literally, because I have to manage the health, emotional wellbeing, and safety of each of the dogs and myself within the physical space we share, not to mention other humans who come into our space. Which is not to say I am resentful of my living arrangements (at least, not most of the time).

I was initially drawn to Haraway's work because I am a dog agility enthusiast, as she is, and her thoughts on companion species resonated for me given my experiences with my canine partners on an *individual* level. However, in my sanctuary context, where one-on-one relationships are subsumed by a communal living arrangement, 'becoming with' a companion species requires the reconciling of various contradictions. As noted above, one contradiction comes with a human being required to evaluate and contend with human expectations of dogs. Another comes with the presumption of knowledge characteristic of human exceptionalism: we cannot truly 'know' dogs, in spite of what science may reveal. Third is the aspiration of a 'true' collaboration derived from an inherently imbalanced power relationship. Also, the question of how training and behavior modification relate to the concept of minimizing human expectations.

I feel enabled in this project of the sanctuary as a visual artist and academic, as well as an animal worker. I bring my artist's sensibility to the sanctuary feeling free from the need to

define, prove, or complete. I am perhaps hopelessly fluid and willing to endlessly re-invent our human-dog collaboration. I see the necessity of both discarding preconceptions and engaging the inability to understand. I recognize that science brings us humans only so far in our relationship with other species. We must make the rest of the way through means less tangible: what animal trainer and poet Vicki Hearne describes as ‘unmediated’ (171). The artist brings an intuitive approach; the academic brings additional criticality.

Sanctuary Life: Theory into Practice

Working in dog rescue, one quickly learns that there are many dogs ‘who may face challenges sharing their lives with humans’. My early enthusiasm prompted me to take in more dogs than planned, and, in no time, I had virtually filled my four-bedroom house with as many dogs as could fit in its approximately 3000-square feet. I committed the sanctuary to admit dogs with any variety of needs, and individual dogs’ needs began to require ongoing reconsideration of space. Our current space configuration for eighteen dogs has them divided into four groups, plus three dogs living by themselves (because they have difficulty sharing living space with other dogs). Each group has its own room, and some groups are able to interact with others. Of the current dogs, the most who can interact together at one time is twelve. Group interactions occur mostly in communal spaces of the house: the family room, main backyard, occasionally the kitchen, and also, at times, my studio. In their respective spaces, the groups are free roaming. The three solo dogs live in kennel spaces in their rooms due to reactivity to other dogs. Our outside space spans about four acres, divided into seven fenced-in areas. The original concept was to allow separate groups of dogs to be outside concurrently, but dogs became highly stressed over the presence of other dogs across fences, so that plan did not work.

Since the sanctuary is the dogs’ home for as long as they need, minimizing stress for each dog is a priority. In broader terms, the sanctuary must provide ‘quality of life’ for every dog. Providing quality of life requires understanding and respecting each dog as an individual. Science has offered helpful guidelines for assessing quality of life for animals, and those guidelines have been most helpful to me as a context for getting to know each dog. Grandin and

Johnson, for example, conclude that animals need to express behaviors of ‘seeking, play, and caring’ (qtd. in Morris 4228); my job is to identify *how* a dog enjoys seeking, playing, and caring.

In addition to allowing for the expression of basic behaviors, the sanctuary must also provide enrichment. The seminal reference *Shelter Medicine for Veterinarians and Staff* defines enrichment as: ‘the provision of a captive animal with the ability to maintain or improve its [sic] physical, behavioral, and psychological functioning via modifications to the housing environment’ (Miller and Zawistowski 541). Enrichment is also greatly rewarding to me as enrichment activities are often those I can do with the dogs. As an example, our red bully dog Penny does not like other dogs. While she has her own room with a variety of toys, an open window, and radio, she most enjoys playing fetch. She has different kinds of balls, and she chooses which one she wants us to play with when we go to the yard. I dedicate time to her daily as our play provides necessary physical and mental exercise. Even during our ‘down time’ together, when we watch tv or she accompanies me while I work, I still throw her ball. For the dogs who do not like other dogs, we humans at the sanctuary provide their only social interaction which is vital to their wellbeing.

One of the most difficult contradictions I face in my sanctuary work is the inverse relationship of the number of dogs to individual dog’s opportunities for enrichment: as the number of dogs rises, opportunities for enrichment decrease, sometimes more for some dogs than others. How does one ‘become with’ with a group, as opposed to an individual? The question not only applies to me the human, but also to each dog at the sanctuary relative to each other and to me. More human caregivers certainly increase enrichment opportunities, but the underlying issue remains the how-to of cobbling together a cross-species communality that sufficiently enriches each member of the community. The experience of the sanctuary has demonstrated that our structure and environment most enriches those dogs who are socially adept with other dogs and humans. Dogs who require individual attention, apart from other dogs, must wait their turn. Dogs who function in a group, share, and cooperate with one another, enjoy greater privileges of roaming, access to the yard, human interaction, and opportunities for play. For me, the ability to provide for each dog adequately but not equally compromises the purpose of the sanctuary. The question becomes, for those dogs whose

enrichment opportunities may be limited relative to the other dogs, is their quality of life better than their being dead?

Herein lies a major contradiction of the sanctuary as stated earlier: how do I as a human navigate my 'human-ness' in liberating the sanctuary dogs from my own expectations? Beyond day-to-day affairs, am I really equipped to determine whether a dog is better off living or dead? Invoking Despret again, I can describe the sanctuary as a site of intersubjectivity: 'becoming what the other suggests to you, accepting a proposal of subjectivity, acting in the manner in which the other addresses you, actualizing and verifying this proposal, in the sense of rendering it true' ('The Becoming of Subjectivity' 135). Despret's accompanying discussion of the use and implications of the word 'we' also resonates, calling to mind the Tagalog words for 'we': *tayo* and *kami*. The former expresses 'we' inclusive, that latter 'we' exclusive. Perhaps one difficulty English faces regarding the 'animal question' is the ambiguity of pronouns. While *tayo*, 'we' inclusive, does not absolve me of anthropocentric tendencies, it does allow me to begin to operate as Steve Baker says, 'other than in identity', a phrase that has become mantra-like for me (Baker 67). My working with the dogs, given their number, encourages the development of sensitivity to the dogs individually and as a group. As the process evolves, I can view my choices and decision-making expansively and with a critical eye. In getting to know the dogs individually and collectively, I begin to identify joy that I see as constituting quality of life.

A case in point is Frances, a dog I regard as representing the type of dog for whom the sanctuary exists. Frances was an early lesson for me in learning to accept a dog for who she is and not what anyone else wants her to be, least of all me. She came to us from the shelter at five years of age, after having been adopted out and returned five times; the last adoption ended in an aggression episode where the adopter's partner felt physically threatened. She was a medium-sized dog, cream colored, possibly some shepherd and bully-type mix. She was the epitome of an anxious dog. Poor Frances lived her life in a state of constant anxiety. When she was particularly stressed or scared, she would urinate and defecate uncontrollably. Her room was stained with trails of urine and loose stool across the floor. Although she had constant access to the yard, she couldn't always control her functions enough to eliminate outside. She would sometimes even urinate or defecate while walking and seemingly not know it. Frances also

feared other dogs and would opt for a vigorous offense to mitigate defense. Her greatest fear was loud noises, thunder especially, but also gunshots from the orchard behind our house. Her entire body would shake, and she would urinate while frantically seeking a safe getaway from the booming sounds. She wore an anxiety-reducing, swaddling shirt, in addition to taking a mild tranquilizer, on top of anti-anxiety medication she took daily. She seemed to take comfort in my holding her tightly, but I worried about doing so too often because I couldn't always be there for her. Luckily, I had no other dogs with a serious thunder phobia needing attention.

It was clear why Frances had trouble keeping a home. She was probably not what most people want in a pet. She was also a lot of work even for me and the other caregivers. We cleaned her room many times a day. And, even now, two years since her passing, traces of her linger on the floor, the furniture, and even on some of the walls. The greatest trace she left, however, was the profound impact she made on me and to my approach to the sanctuary. While I recognized that Frances would probably never be a pet, I saw no reason why she couldn't live happily on her own terms. If asked whether or not it would have been kinder to euthanize Frances than to let her live a life of one anxious moment to the next, I would answer that her moments of joy, as I saw them, gave her quality of life. I think of our warm cuddles as far outnumbering the thunderstorms. And the joy she showed chasing a tennis ball was more than I could possibly deny her.

My relationship with Frances also exemplifies how forced discomfort has pushed me beyond my human-centered privilege. To be blunt, a very tangible example: living with 20 dogs has forced me to adjust my standards of cleanliness and hygiene. While I may not have been fastidious in keeping a clean home prior to the sanctuary, I had no choice after the fact. While people commonly relinquish pets to shelters due to the pet's unacceptable elimination habits, I found myself living with animals who routinely eliminated in the house. Ironically, urination and defecation, such basic, natural functions, are the functions humans seek to control first. I had to ask myself whether or not I would relieve the sanctuary dogs of this particular human expectation. With Frances, I could have let her live outdoors – and I tried. I recognized that she preferred to stay in the house, however, so I accepted who she was, let her stay indoors (with outdoor access) and lived with the consequence of constantly cleaning up after her. Having made

this concession with Frances, I couldn't reasonably withhold it from other dogs. Although I encourage the dogs to eliminate outside, they maintain discreet spots inside which they use (but almost all the dogs choose to eliminate outside consistently). Suffice it to say, we don't get many visitors to the house.

Who trained whom?

The issue of house training raises the question of training in general. For many pet keepers, training is a given, an expected activity that occurs between human and dog. Not only does training cultivate the bond between human and dog, the dog learns how to behave appropriately in a human world. Depending on one's training modality, the human can be a 'pack leader' or a partner in learning. For dog trainer and behaviorist Kathy Sdao, 'training' is a means by which we humans can let go of our preconceptions of self and dog and open ourselves to accepting the canine 'other':

Dedicating energy to seeing 'the other' – fully perceiving the range and subtlety of the animal's behaviors – has become the most important component of the training I do and the training I teach my students... By emptying ourselves of ourselves, we all can make room for 'the other' to enter our awareness. This is the heart of effective training – and of successful relationships. (Sdao 88)

Sdao reflects the contemporary, science-based approach to training based on positive reinforcement, also referred to as force-free training. This type of training focuses on cultivating the relationship between human and dog and elicits desirable behaviors (on the dog's part, from the human's point of view) as a product of a collaborative relationship. My introduction to this training philosophy – via clicker training – completely transformed my views on the nature and possibilities of cross-species collaboration. While I previously believed in teaching my dog 'commands' to prompt her to do what I wanted, I now 'cue' my canine partner to act in concert with me.

Like Haraway, I come to my views on dog-human collaboration through the sport of dog agility. Not until I started training with my dogs in agility did I experience the sensation of

what dog-human collaboration can look and feel like. Many agility enthusiasts, like Haraway, describe the dog-human team running an agility course as a dance: ‘the syncopated dance of rule and invention is the choreography that reshapes players’ (*When Species Meet* 243). To see an experienced team perform is to watch unity and precision in graceful execution. The dog and human connect so singularly, yet non-verbally, and perform seamlessly. From my perspective as the human actor in the team, the connection with my canine teammate is an exhilarating ‘becoming with’, two forged into one.

I should add, at this point, that while I do make a distinction between personal dogs and sanctuary dogs (mostly for practicality’s sake: monitoring sanctuary needs, expenses and such), I strive to treat all the dogs the same, offer each the same opportunities as I seek to identify individual preferences. Prior to establishing the sanctuary, I would simply adopt dogs from the shelter rather than see them euthanized for behavioral issues. The dogs I consider ‘personal’ fall into this category, plus two dogs I chose outright, one from a breeder, the other from a shelter. I compete in dog sports primarily with my ‘personal’ dogs, but I also train sanctuary dogs in activities such as agility and herding. For all dogs, this type of training serves mostly as enrichment – for them and for me!

My bred dog Narra, a German shepherd dog, shared a personal moment of enlightenment for me when I first introduced her to sheep herding. The sheep were contained in a large pen in the middle of the pasture. I walked her up to the pen, on leash. She sniffed and explored her environment, not yet noticing the sheep. When she did see them, her ears pricked up, head raised regally, and body straightened. Our herding trainer called to me to drop the leash, and, as I did, Narra raced excitedly around the pen, barking at the sheep. She soon settled into a groove and began to demonstrate the graceful trot her breed is known for. I joined her in circling the pen. She held a position opposite me, and as I moved one direction, she moved the other, maintaining that opposite position. I circled counterclockwise, she did the same, going ‘away to me’. I moved clockwise, she followed, going ‘come by’. For the first time, I felt as if I was fully experiencing her doing what she was meant to do – actually, what she was bred to do. She exhibited a behavior I had never seen before; we hadn’t trained for it. She saw the sheep,

and a switch went on. I was in awe seeing her exercise her agency in such an independent way. Also, for the first time, I felt like we were actual partners in an authentic collaboration.

Because I experience joy in running agility with my dog or herding sheep with her, I selfishly want her to enjoy it, too. As art provocateur Dave Hickey might say, because we enjoy beauty, we want it to be good for us. In this case, I want it to be good for my dog, too. In general, any kind of positive reinforcement-based training is enriching for dogs, but what I enjoy as ‘authentic collaboration’ is the feeling that my dog and I are each exercising our full agency independently but together. I view collaboration in art terms, as the creation of something new, brought about by the coming together of independent thinkers/creators; the creation is greater than the sum of its parts and can exist only through that collaboration, Haraway’s ‘significant otherness’ realized.

While I enjoy training with all the dogs, I do make a philosophical distinction between training for sport and training to conform to human expectations. With regard to the latter – though I do understand the need for it – I do not care to train for ‘adoptability’. Much training in shelters and among rescue groups occurs for the purpose of making dogs appear more ‘adoptable’. Many prospective adopters want a dog who will walk nicely on a leash, not jump on them, sit when they say sit. Bonus points for a dog who will shake/give paw/high five. Generally speaking, many prospective adopters want a dog who will be a good companion, i.e., fit nicely into their lives, act politely, be fun when appropriate, and not cause problems – a pet. That desire conflicts with our sanctuary philosophy in that the aim of that kind of training is conformity. In the sanctuary, I check my human bias most explicitly regarding the behaviors I seek from the dogs. I am very conscious of behaviors that I may want out of personal consideration rather than shared need or wellbeing. That is, I will not ask the dogs to do anything they don’t want to do (the exception being handling for medical care and general health and safety). Our compromise on house training is an example. Generally speaking, the sanctuary dogs probably exhibit a number of behaviors many people would not want of their pets. To my mind, they’re not at the sanctuary to be pets.

I perhaps feel strongly about training for adoptability because I think of it as forced conformity to non-native norms. I see it as a form of colonization, from my strictly personal, postcolonial viewpoint. To me, training for conformity feels like the education mandated by American Indian Residential Schools in the U.S. and Canada, in the 18th and 19th centuries: ‘The core thinking of those running the system could not have been framed more clearly: to be discernibly Indian was to be other than human; to be human, one could not be discernibly Indian’ (Churchill 14). The description of that ‘education’ remarkably assesses human-ness as a virtue and non-human-ness as a vice to be expelled. To me, asking dogs to act contrary to their nature is asking them be less dog. I oppose a training philosophy that focuses on human designs at the expense of a dog’s individuality and subjectivity. My contention is with myopic training fueled by anthropocentrism. For dogs and humans to share fulfilling lives, the dog must not be the only half made to conform to the other. Even though our sanctuary’s mission addresses dogs who face challenges living with humans, our vision believes in ‘People and dogs living in ever evolving collaboration’.

Dogs and Art

The most significant connection between my work as an artist and my work in animal welfare is this postcolonial perspective on petkeeping. I derive empathy for the canine subject the exploration of identity in the context of ‘otherness’: of race, ethnicity, and culture. I have come to realize that the concerns that drive my studio work are essentially the same concerns that drive the sanctuary. Affirmations of identity, subjectivity and agency constitute the core of both the studio and the sanctuary. Artist and art historian Steve Baker sees the connection between art and animal work; revisiting my favorite quote from him: ‘Art’s work – moving the human away from anthropocentric meanings and subjective identity – is presented as much the same thing as the animal’s work. It is the work of figuring out how to operate *other-than-in-identity*’ (67, my emphasis).

Both the studio and the sanctuary engage identity through processes of knowing – how we gain knowledge and identify it, how we organize it, how we act upon it. As a person of

color, immigrant, and member of the LGBTQ+ community living in the United States, I necessarily produce work that manifests my identity as the ‘other’ in a culture governed by racialized/gendered/capitalist Western modernism. With a postcolonial lens, I concur with Philip Armstrong's identification of shared concerns between postcolonialism and animal studies:

(a) [that] ideas of an absolute difference between the human and the animal (and the superiority of the former over the latter) owe a great deal to the colonial legacies of European modernity and (b) that the indigenous cultural knowledges that imperialism has attempted to efface continue to pose radical challenges to the dominance of Western value systems. (Armstrong 414)

Unfortunately for *canis familiaris*, a history of colonization by humans can no more be undone than can the four hundred years of Spanish colonization in my native Philippines. The strategy to be adopted instead is to subvert the imposed normativities of colonization and establish means by which independent subjectivities are acknowledged and harmonious collaboration can subvert dominant paradigms.

My ‘other’-ness underlies my affinity for ‘problem’ dogs. They and I both live the consequences of not conforming to any number of social and cultural expectations. To wit, numerous parallels between racism and discrimination against pit bull-type dogs widely seen in popular culture: t-shirts that read ‘Racism is the Pits’,² the appropriation of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s ‘I Have a Dream’ speech for pit bull advocacy,³ as well as equating racial profiling with breed-specific legislation.⁴ Harlan Weaver observes queerness in pit bull advocacy, writing: ‘[T]here is something queer here, as the gay pride marchers and dog adopters intent on helping their dogs become “who they were meant to be” make clear’. Weaver sees in ‘dog love’ a kind of intimacy with the potential to subvert normative tropes through alternative, non-human means of understanding (Weaver 350-352). From Haraway’s emblematic bulldogs of French prostitutes to Weaver’s transformative ‘dog love’, we humans must acknowledge that our relationships with our animals not only reflect who we are but also feed our constructions of self.

In the spirit of the 1972 classic children’s book on empathy, *Free to Be... You and Me*,

Free to Be Dog Haven embraces the founding principle that every animal is an individual, humans included. The sanctuary indeed serves as a haven, and the name ‘Free to Be Dog Haven’ is a thoroughly considered and meaningful choice. (To wit, see Figures 1 and 2, designs representing the sanctuary.) I gladly include non-human species in contemporary estimations of otherness, especially as I see my own experiences reflected in many of theirs. We all strive to be ‘who [we] were meant to be’. Thus, my work — our work — in the sanctuary is advocacy for dogs (and humans) in the context of social justice.



Figure 1. Free to Be Dog Haven logo, 2013.

Linocut of my dog Theo ‘roaching’: rolling on his back in pure joy. To me, this image embodies a dog in all his sentience: enjoying life, being a dog, with no human interaction.



Figure 2. 'Tongue Out' t-shirt design (2017)

*Linocut of foster dog Ella (since adopted). Sanctuary branding is dogs being 'doggy'
— I want the images to be visceral, unfussy, and fun.*

Art offers a meaningful space for advocacy and for exploring Baker's 'other-than-in-identity'-ness. After all, art has served an historical function as voicing alternative points of view that, in their times, were regarded disapprovingly as disrupting norms. Art, arguably, may also offer its audiences access to a sensate experience that emerges only from the sharing of an unfamiliar perspective. In sensate or 'aesthetic' experience, intuition, emotion, and the non-verbal engage. Our experience with dogs is no different. At the risk of romanticizing, my artist's view of the dog-human relationship can perhaps be described, as J.M. Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello says, in terms of the heart: 'The heart is the seat of a faculty, *sympathy*, that allows us to share at times the being of another. Sympathy has everything to do with the subject and little to do with object' (Coetzee 34-35). Whether sympathetic or not, my approach to the dog-human relationship embodied by the sanctuary calls for ever-evolving collaboration between dog and

human, an ongoing ‘becoming with’ from which new, multispecies identities emerge. These identities – and the collaborations that engender them – confront humanist and speciesist assumptions in ways not afforded by conventional practices, artistic, scientific, or otherwise.

Conclusion

The vision that motivates the sanctuary’s mission is this: ‘dogs and people sharing their lives in ever-evolving collaboration’. As with collaboration in the arts, a collaborative life with dogs cannot be ends-oriented; you never know what you will get. Moreover, you cannot presume to anticipate what any individual dog – or human – will bring to the collaboration. An early and vital lesson I learned in my work with shelter dogs is not to label the animal. To do so often relegates that dog to a single dimension and limits humans’ abilities to see their potential. I choose not to label a dog ‘aggressive’, ‘anxious’, as ‘not liking other dogs’ or ‘fearful of men’, etc. Breed labels also encourage certain views of types of dogs. Rather, in collaborative cohabitation, the dog must be regarded as an individual and the nature of the collaboration as fluid, constantly evolving, meeting any number of circumstances and conditions.

The same can be said of the human(s) in these collaborations. Living with up to twenty dogs in my house, I have, as noted previously, often reconsidered my own needs relative to my shared living situation. Some reconsiderations come easily, others with greater hesitation, and some, admittedly, with acquiescence. Julie A. Smith recounts very similar experiences living with rabbits as a member of the House Rabbit Society (HRS). She writes that: ‘[HRS] members surrendered enormous control over their homes. Many HRS members “rabbit-proofed” their houses, a playful word that euphemized extensive modifications’. She goes on to describe her own home and ‘modifications’ she implemented to accommodate the rabbits, concluding: ‘Many of us found it easier to change ourselves than the premises’ (Smith 187). I personally know many multi-dog (three or more) households, and the humans, in all cases, have modified their living spaces to accommodate the dogs’ needs. (For some insight into the physical modifications of our living spaces, see Figures 3, 4, and 5: stills from a recent video series entitled *For the dogsitter.*)

The choice to live with dogs in this manner is clearly a preference, and the humans who do so, I dare say, know what they're getting into. On the other hand, I'm reminded of various memes, videos, and other images online of people surrounded by hordes of dogs; commenters invariably write 'looks like heaven' or 'that's my dream'.⁵ What the 'dream' obfuscates, however, is the inherent power relationship that underlies petkeeping. Yi-Fu Tuan, in *Dominance and Affection: The Making of Pets*, might contend that a high ratio of non-human animals to human may jeopardize human dominance to the point that it diminishes affection. In other words, as human hegemony in the home is challenged, so, potentially, is human affection.

Smith, writing in response to Tuan, does not deny the power relationship but seeks to redefine it from the human perspective. My experience with Free to Be Dog Haven does not diverge greatly from her concept of 'performance ethics'. Like Smith, I struggle for a more egalitarian relationship with dogs, despite the obvious power that rests with controlling resources and bringing a non-human species into a human environment. My emphasis on collaboration and hers on performance both acknowledge non-human animals' agency – and the struggle to liberate and encourage it in a human world.



Figure 3. For the dogsitter, #3, video still (2019)

My most recent work: a series a videos I made for the dogsitter, providing instructions on various aspects of the dogs' needs. Here, it's feeding time. The dogs are separated at mealtime, some in crates.



Figure 4. For the dogsitter, #1, video still (2019)

Front door to the house, gates up (all over the house). A main gate surrounds the front door as a type of airlock.

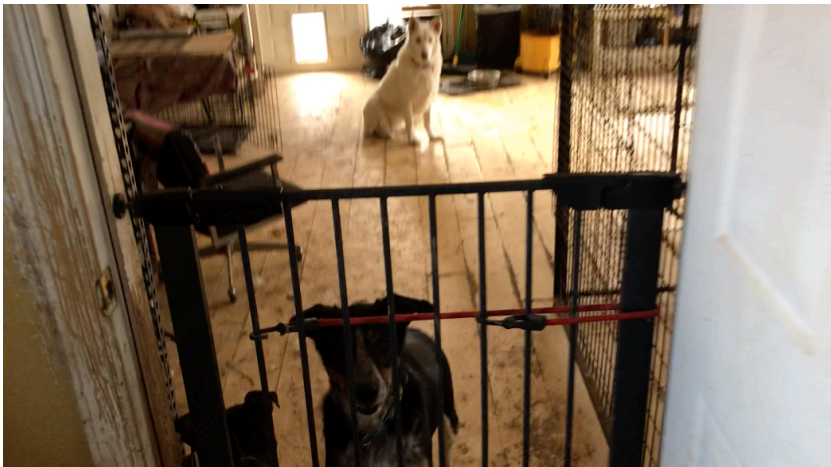


Figure 5. For the dogsitter, #2, video still (2019)

View into the studio. The house is divided into four main areas: studio, family room, entry way /upstairs, basement. Each area has a dog door to a fenced-in area of the yard, so the dogs have in-and-out access. The studio also has two kennels (to the right in the image above) for two dogs who cannot be free roaming with the other dogs. Otherwise, all the dogs are loose in their designated section of the house. The various groups can interact with appropriate monitoring.

My particular emphasis acknowledges canine subjectivity and agency in the context of colonialist, Western, modernist human fictions. As much as *canis familiaris* is a human invention, we humans constantly demand that our canine companions conform to popular myths, often aggrandizing humans; euthanasia awaits dogs who don't conform. Our sanctuary is a site of ongoing investigation: we seek to map the territory between 'free' and 'pet'. Returning to my Tagalog example of the word 'we,' our collaboration embraces the 'we inclusive' – *tayo* – in a context where even pets are considered 'we exclusive' – *kami*. Multiple dogs aside, I see our sanctuary as a model, an alternative to conventional petkeeping. Dogs, especially in the western world, are perhaps loved by people as never before. The question is: what are the conditions of that love?

Notes

¹ A note on language: when referring to the sanctuary, I use the pronoun 'we' in deference to the collaborative space created by the dogs and me. The 'we' also includes other human caregivers and volunteers. Additional pronouns are: us, our. I also opt for 'they', 'them', and 'their' in cases of unidentified gender, whether plural or singular.

² For an example, see <https://merchmethod.com/collections/la-pit/products/racism-otis-white-mens-tee>

³ See <http://www.ihadro.org/>; also, <https://www.redbubble.com/people/beverlytazangel/works/11375811-i-have-a-dream-no-bsl?p=classic-tee>

⁴ For reference: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/02/06/troublemakers-2>

⁵ For examples, see: https://www.instagram.com/territorio_de_zaguates/; <https://www.facebook.com/doggyfarmtrips/>; <https://youtu.be/ShtuyQiRi2M>

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